

Rest Stop

by Matt Mullins

Wicklow was trying to take a crap at a filthy Alabama rest stop: knife-scarred graffiti stall, overflowing trash can, floor sticky with who knew what, but he was alone, which was all he ever wanted out of a public restroom.

Wicklow's not-yet-wife and Wicklow were on their way back to Chicago from New Orleans where they'd spent the week drinking too much and ignoring their problems—the latest being this throbbing retreat made in a red Toyota Tercel with crank windows and a broken air conditioner. Right before the rest stop they'd been arguing about the wind. Specifically, the windows. “Goddammit, up,” or “Fuck that, down.” Up because the wind kept whipping her hair out of its ponytail cinch and into her mouth. Down because it was pushing ninety degrees outside and Wicklow was still sweating out the bourbon from their last night in the French Quarter. A night where they'd both drunk enough to get into a fight, but too much to keep track of what, exactly, they were fighting about. The hex of that bad vibe had followed them out of the quarter, down the highway, and into the empty parking lot of this rest stop just south of Montgomery where Wicklow had left her scowling in the car.

Wicklow sat in the handicapped stall, pants down and straining, fed up to here with a world in which he couldn't even take a decent crap. He knew this withholding of relief was personal, some kind of payback for everything and then some. He pushed angrily and groaned with red-faced hatred for his own body, finally forcing some pitiful result. Just as the bathroom door slammed open to clench him up again.

Two pairs of motorcycle boots scuffed across the cracked tiles. Leather squeaked. Belts jangled. Piss hit porcelain.

“Hoo wee! What the fuck. Goddamn rat at crawled up somebody's ass and fuckin' died, man.”

Drawling laughter. “I hear that.”

“Shee-it. Some motherfucker got something seriously wrong with his fuckin' ass.”

“Fuck off, rednecks.”

The words were bunched up inside Wicklow's mouth, on the verge of spilling out, when he imagined the stall door kicked in, his face shoved into the toilet. So he held back, considered the false play at cool. “Been riding hard and put up wet, boys.” Then he realized saying something like that would probably get his ass kicked, too. He decided to say nothing at all, acting as if he somehow hadn't heard what all three of them knew he must have heard. He even stilled his breath, waiting in silence as they zipped, mumbled a few things and left, laughing at what Wicklow tried to convince himself was something else.

When Wicklow came out of the bathroom she was gone. Along with the car. There were only the two beefy bikers sitting on their hogs. Looking at Wicklow looking around in shock at the otherwise empty parking lot. Listening as Wicklow explained his sorry self and asked for a ride. Grinning hard and shaking their heads as the bigger of the two thumbed for Wicklow to get on back, and Wicklow swinging his leg over the bitch seat and putting his arms around the man's waist. Wicklow having to lean into that biker's back, smell the rank leather, hold on and hope the wind wouldn't tear him loose as that motorcycle lurched through its gears and after her.

